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Iranian Modern Art in Perspective

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REFERENCES

Talinn Grigor. *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*, Londres : Reaktion Books, 2014

Behdjat Sadr: traces, Paris : Zamân Books, 2014. Sous la dir. de Morad Montazami et Narmine Sadeg

Unedited History: séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours, Paris : Paris-Musées, 2014

- 1 The Iranian Revolution of 1979 (and the subsequent eight years of the Iraq-Iran war) divided the history of Iran and its art, into two. The name Iranian Cultural Revolution (1980-1987) says it all. With the revolution, a whole new system of image production took charge of the local visual culture. A different curriculum was imposed on art universities and a different system of art patronage took over, dictating a new official understanding of art. For an Iranian modern art which had previously enjoyed state support, this meant nothing but discontinuity. The field was “cleansed” of its previous major players: they went into exile while their artworks were removed from display. The Cultural Revolution affected not only cultural production, but the way the previous culture was received and interpreted. The Revolution affected all subsequent thinking about Iran, creating two major discourses within and without the country, discourses that long appeared irreconcilable with or untranslatable to one another.
- 2 Compared with the art of the Qajar period (1785-1925) which took more than a century to attract the attention of art historians outside Iran, Iranian modern art has been more fortunate: four decades after its culmination, it has started to lay claim to the position it deserves within the discipline of art history. This can partly be ascribed to the recent efforts of Iranian scholars, both in Iran and abroad, to bring the two visual discourses into dialogue by focusing on the relationship of art to politics. Such a political approach to art

history is understandable as revolutions happen in response to an impossibility of negotiation (and in the case of a cultural revolution, the undesirability of a dialogue), and as such, any attempt towards a coherent Iranian cultural discourse cannot avoid discussing the politics behind the Iranian Revolution.

- 3 It could be expected that the books reviewed here all react, in one way or the other, to the rupture that the revolution signifies. Such a divide has encouraged their various authors and editors to think of various categorizations (such as “the Street, the Studio and the Exile”) to make sense of this or instead try to present an “unedited” version of such a history. For instance, Talinn Grigor writes: “For the organizational purposes of this study, contemporary Iranian artists, inside and outside Iran, can be collectively divided into four broad groups: 1) the various avant-garde artists of the Pahlavi era; 2) the so-called Revolutionary Painters; 3) the ‘children of the 1360s’; and 4) the young artists emerging now.”¹
- 4 Although this is a widely used categorization in everyday talk on Iranian art, one can ask what is left out when such a categorization is applied to the whole body of Iranian art as a continuous current within a visual culture. Even an abstract painter such as Behjat Sadr, as is apparent in the bilingual monograph carefully and exquisitely put together by Morad Montazami and Narmin Sadeg, reflects the same mark that politics has left on the art of the time. The attention paid today to the works of Iranian artists who chose to work in Western styles is not just an attempt to refresh a historical memory and represent the underrepresented, but a sign of a cultural desire among a generation of Iranian intellectuals to rethink and redeem an intellectual position ignored in the last three decades, and to show how the work of such artists went beyond a simple, uncritical “mimesis” of Western aesthetics. Many questions put forward in the works of that generation of artists are still valid today and their answers to those questions are rich enough to serve as a foundation for Iranian contemporary artists. Thus writes Behjat Sadr in one of her poems: “For whom does one paint on canvas the end of the century’s angst and fear? Must one speak? Must one photograph? Must one write? Paint? [...] One must, must do everything to convey the meaning of our times, to tear it out of magazines, paste it and use other means too. [...] As the leftists say, ‘the message’ can be expressed with collage. I hate the lexicon of the left.”² The ways in which a generation of Iranian artists answered these questions in their practices testifies to the emergence of a different form of modernism. Had it continued, it can be argued, such version of modernism could have developed a broad and distinct visual language useable across the whole Middle East.
- 5 This is to claim that the current tendency among scholars in the field is not an attempt to present a political reading of an apolitical art movement, but rather, that Iranian modern art was imbued with such a political quality in the first place. As Anoush Ganjipour rightly observes, “On the one hand, the adoption of modern art has a political purpose as it serves to introduce new values and challenge the old ones. On the other hand, it is about controlling the image that a community conveys to the outside. The relationship between art and politics, as such, however, did not become problematic until Iranian artists felt concerned for what was becoming known in the language of the time as the ‘responsibility of intellectuals’. Indeed, it is here that one can spot the first moment of such a relationship.”³
- 6 A very different kind of politicization of art happened in the post-revolutionary era: “In fact, after the 1979 Revolution, as the state established itself, it began to lay claim to absolute and complete truth. Trying to provide a governmental body for the truth of

Shiite Islam, the Islamic Republic had to know *everything*. This fundamental truth needed to be an integral part of the state, policy, economy, society, culture... and, of course, of art and literature. Nothing was exempted from this rule, the same way no separation was allowed to exist between different domains. In such logic, *everything* had to return to the truth of the State.”⁴

- 7 No matter how unavoidable an engagement with politics might be for an art historical account, there is always the danger of a fascination with the void, and of representing—to use Kantian terminology—a “sublime” image of what might otherwise appear “beautiful”. There is always the danger of taking for granted the official categorization of art and reiterating the same periodization when dealing with the history of culture. Focusing on change and rupture can result in neglecting what remains and continues of the cultural life. The authors’ formulations, in this case, differ from those of their counterparts inside Iran, in that the Iranian modern art does not appear to the latter as something *passé*, but rather as an extension of a visual language continuously reappearing in different forms and styles that might seem irrelevant or contradictory.
- 8 In comparison to the books reviewed here, Persian resources are more interested in similarities and try to look at the local developments of art, at what is present from the past in the current moment. The sense of awe that the reviewed exhibition catalogues or monographs inspire (portraying the revolution as the victory of death and ignorance over life and enlightenment) is quite alien to an Iranian audience living within the Iranian visual culture. The reason for this cannot be reduced to the fact that one cannot arrive at an unbiased self-image through looking from the viewpoint of his own culture. It could be equally be said that an approach observing the political and aesthetic norms of a Western audience might be incapable of incorporating into its outlook those parts of a visual culture which, although play an important function within a local system of image production, appear “secondary” and insignificant to the outsiders. As such, it is no coincidence that all these studies reserve a high position for the documentary photography of the time of revolution and war but exclude the developments of Persian “traditional” visual arts (such as calligraphy) or even classical one. They include the achievements of pre-revolution Iranian cinema or the avant-garde performances at Shiraz Arts Festival, but exclude the achievements of the same cinema after the revolution. They include the naïve paintings and posters of the time of revolution but exclude a later sophisticated graphic design movement which achieved a mature aesthetics of its own, in order to represent the non-governmental culture of the post-revolution era.
- 9 In this sense, the books reviewed here all show a particular interest in the relation of art to politics, very much inspired by postcolonial and cultural studies methodologies. They try to construct a framework for reading Iranian modern art and coming to terms with the rupture of the revolution within the fabric of Iranian culture and art. The difficulty associated with this endeavour is the difficulty of a first-timer. It would be no small achievement if such writings could help to lay the foundation of a more comprehensive historiography of modern Iranian art. Be it a monograph, catalogue, collection of essays or a concise art historical account, these are the first attempts, on the European side of the cultural divide (published in French, English or both, not to forget a further Italian translation of the *Unedited History* which is expected to appear soon).
- 10 If the duty of art history is to deal with the comprehensible side of artworks and to make it as clear as the day, postcolonial studies, on the other hand, have always been obsessed

with the “dark side of the moon”. If art history is plagued with certain power relations affecting its judgments, cultural studies is obsessed with the very plague itself. When dealing with the latter approach, one is very often tempted to ask: “But isn’t there anything more to this or that artwork than its connection to politics?” Classical methodologies of art history have the potential to counterbalance such tendencies, yet, in the case of Iranian modern art, the required organized archives, art institutions and academic disciplines that could make such researches possible are lacking. In addition to the essays of the recent catalogues, one can hope that the increasing number of exhibitions, catalogues and monographs will foster better access to the dispersed material on the subject. (With the rich body of its works, many appearing for the very first time, the *Unedited History* exhibition serves as a very good example in this respect.) If the divide in the art historical approaches to Iranian contemporary art could be reconciled, one could hope that the effects would soon be felt in the field of art production. In the field of art history, it is not uncommon that the Hegelian idea of quantity turning into quality at a certain point becomes a reality as it often happens that a body of classified objects succeeds in putting an end to subjective uncertainties. In the absence of that, one would be left with the single dull option of theorizing the void.

NOTES

1. Grigor, Talinn. *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*, London: Reaktion Books, 2014, p. 105
2. Behdjat Sadr: *Traces*, Paris : Zamân Books, 2014. Sous la dir. de Morad Montazami, Narmin Sadeg, p. 163
3. Ganjipour, Anoush. “Art et politique : les chicanes d’un rapport”, in *Unedited History: Iran 1960-2014 (Séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours)*, Paris : Paris Musées, 2014, p. 17
4. Ganjipour, Anoush. “Art et politique : les chicanes d’un rapport”, in *Unedited History*, *Ibid.*, p. 18